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SENSITIVE
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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/CEN

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TAGS: [SCUL](#) [SENV](#) [TI](#)

SUBJECT: ROCKING DUSHANBE - MIDNIGHT EARTHQUAKE PARTY FINALLY BRINGS
TAJIKS TOGETHER

¶1. (SBU) In a rare show of national unity, residents of Dushanbe and other large cities poured into the streets late on January 9, remaining outdoors in the tens of thousands until early morning, because of rumors that a powerful earthquake would occur between 1 a.m. and 4 a.m. The Government, which generally forbids demonstrations and large unofficial public gatherings, urged calm, but to no effect. It later said it was investigating the source of the rumor. Theories abound about foreign and domestic political intrigue associated with this (non)-event. End Summary.

AN UNAUTHORIZED DEMONSTRATION

¶2. (SBU) No one knows how the rumor got started, but it seized control of much of the population of Dushanbe at lightning speed. Embassy local staff estimated the entire city knew about the purportedly impending earthquake within two hours of the first messages appearing on peoples' cellphones. Several staff members reported they were woken up by agitated neighbors and urged to go outdoors. There was a noticeable mood of panic in the air. An Amcit embassy staffer walking home from a party shortly after midnight found the streets crowded with people; Embassy LES guessed that up to 90 percent of Dushanbe residents left their houses to await the earthquake outdoors. Families drove around for hours calling on friends and relatives to make sure they too were outdoors. There were reportedly similar scenes in Khujand and Kulyab.

¶3. (SBU) The telecom sector showed it was still the most dynamic part of the economy. SMS messaging passed word of the impending earthquake quickly and efficiently throughout the population, showing that in one sense Tajikistan is well integrated with the world -- embassy staff received urgent calls and messages from relatives as far away as Australia, telling them to get out of their houses before the roofs and walls fell in.

THE FOREIGN HAND!

¶4. (SBU) Local internet chat rooms and the word-of-mouth grapevine provided a number of conspiracy theories surrounding the fictional earthquake and how news of it spread:

(A) The state information agency, Khovar, reported there would be an earthquake.

(B) The State Seismic Institute reported the same, based on pseudo-scientific theory that Tajikistan was due for a big earthquake simply because more than 100 years had passed since the last one, the 1907 Karatog earthquake which killed 12,000.

(C) President Rahmon himself spoke on TV to warn of the quake.

(D) More interestingly, the Russian 201st Motorized Infantry Division was on high alert and ready to act in case of emergency.

(Subtheory - the Russian Embassy in Dushanbe received a call from high level officials in the Tajik government warning of the earthquake.)

(E) The U.S. Embassy ordered American staff to evacuate 24 hours prior to earthquake.

(F) The Salafis planted the rumor to create problems for the

Government, in revenge for the recent decision to ban them.

(G) The Government planted the rumor to distract public attention from the banning of the Salafis.

15. (SBU) Government response was weak. Police reportedly drove around some neighborhoods with loudspeakers, urging people to flee their homes, then later urging them to go back indoors. One local television station ran a text line under its normal program of traditional Tajik singing and dancing, telling people not to believe any rumors they heard; it did not specify which rumors they were to disbelieve. On Monday morning the Government announced that the State Security Committee was investigating the rumors, and that the QState Security Committee was investigating the rumors, and that the perpetrators would face severe punishment.

COMMENT: QUAKING IN THEIR JURABIS

16. (SBU) A series of minor earthquakes in the past two weeks set the stage for this minor incident of mass-hysteria. The lack of reliable news, and lack of official response, provided fertile ground for absurd rumors. The recent banning of Salafis and general stresses of getting through the winter probably enlivened the rumors. In a country where large unofficial public gatherings are generally forbidden, it proved easy to get the mass of the population into the streets without planning or intention, and the Government was powerless to influence events. End Comment.